



## **GOVERNMENT OF THE COOK ISLANDS**

### **COUNTRY REPORT 2024**

**Thirtieth anniversary of the  
Fourth World Conference on Women and adoption of the  
Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)**

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## Acronyms

<b>BPfA</b>	Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
<b>CEIT</b>	Centre of Excellence for Information Technology, Cook Islands
<b>CIBPW</b>	Cook Islands Business and Professional Women's Association
<b>CIDSI</b>	Cook Islands Dyslexia Society Incorporated
<b>CIFWA</b>	Cook Islands Family and Welfare Association
<b>CINCW</b>	Cook Islands National Council of Women
<b>CPR</b>	Contraceptive Prevalence Rate
<b>CSE</b>	Comprehensive Sexuality Education
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organisation
<b>CSW</b>	Commission on the Status of Women
<b>DIPD 2020-2025</b>	Cook Islands Disability Inclusive Development Policy 2020-2025
<b>EDS 2030</b>	Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030
<b>EMCI</b>	Emergency Management Cook Islands
<b>ERR</b>	Cook Islands Economic Recovery Roadmap
<b>GBV</b>	Gender Based Violence
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>ICT</b>	Information and Communication Technology
<b>INTAFF</b>	Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs
<b>MOUs</b>	Memorandums of understanding
<b>NCCP 2022-2027</b>	Cook Islands National Cancer Control Plan 2022-2027
<b>NCDs</b>	Non-communicable diseases
<b>NDS 2024-2030</b>	National Digital Strategy 2024-2030
<b>NEP 2022-2032</b>	National Environment Policy 2022-2032
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental organisation

<b>NPGWE 2019-2024</b>	Cook Islands National Policy on Gender Equity and Women's Empowerment 2019-2024
<b>NPPP</b>	Cook Islands National Pandemic Preparedness Plan: Respiratory Pathogens
<b>NSDA 2020+</b>	National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+, Cook Islands
<b>NSO</b>	Cook Islands National Statistics Office
<b>NSP 2023-2026</b>	Cook Islands National Security Policy 2023-2026
<b>PIF</b>	Pacific Islands Forum
<b>PLGED</b>	Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration
<b>PTI</b>	Punanga Tauturu Incorporated (Cook Islands Women's Counselling Centre)
<b>SAP 2024-2028</b>	Cook Islands Social Assistance Policy 2024-2028
<b>SDG5</b>	Sustainable Development Goal 5, United Nations
<b>SIF</b>	Social Impact Fund (administered by Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs)
<b>SPS</b>	Social Policy and Services Business Unit, Ministry of Internal Affairs, Cook Islands
<b>SRH</b>	Sexual and Reproductive Health
<b>STEM</b>	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
<b>Te POM</b>	Te Punanga Ora'anga Matutu (Men's Counselling Centre), Cook Islands
<b>WDP</b>	Women Development Officers

## Foreword



Kia Orana,

***Ko te vaine te ivi mokotua o te Baseleia (Our women, the backbone of the Nation)*** - Fanaura Kingstone, 1995.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) is of great importance in our journey in advancing womens empowerment in the Cook Islands. It is a roadmap to our achieving gender equality and empowering women worldwide.

In 1995, Cook Islands Government and Non-Government Organisation leaders travelled to Beijing to attend the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women. Next year will be 30 years since that initial meeting.

We have made commendable inroads made in women in leadership, health, education and social protection for all Cook Islands women and their families, a tribute to dedicated cooperation by Government and the people. Yet this promising report is dampened by the continuing domestic violence figures registering in our Police and Justice records, and the intruding impact climate change wields on the lives of our women and their families.

This report, our third country report reflects the contribution of many, committed to progressing the status and participation of our women. Let us reaffirm our commitment to the principles of the Beijing Platform for Action and renew our efforts to create a society where gender equality is a way of life.

Te Atua te aro'a no tatou.

**Honourable Vainetutai Rose Toki-Brown**

Minister of Internal Affairs

## **Section 1. Introduction and Overview**

### **1a. Overview**

This report presents the Cook Islands' progress on measures and actions taken to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women in line with the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (BPfA).

The past five years have presented unprecedented challenges for the Cook Islands. In 2020, prior to the pandemic, tourism accounted for 66% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which was the highest in the region (Cook Islands Government & UNDP, 2022). From 2014 until the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Cook Islands experienced strong economic growth, with its GDP growing at an average of 6% annually between 2014-2019, presenting the highest among all Pacific Small Islands States. This reliance on the tourism sector made the Cook Islands' economy particularly vulnerable to external shocks. As such, when the Cook Islands closed its borders in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the tourism industry collapsed, this led to the economy contracting by 5.9% in 2020 and 29% in 2021 (Cook Islands Government & UNDP, 2022).

While the Cook Islands was able to remain COVID-19-free for most of the pandemic and recorded one of the lowest COVID-19 death tolls in the world, the pandemic nonetheless had significant negative impacts on the country, including in areas such as employment; business viability; government finances; and Cook Islanders' social wellbeing and mental health. A further significant challenge over the past five years has been the continuous high cost of living, with many Cook Islanders finding their household income insufficient to cover weekly expenses (Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2022). Further, push factors have continued to lead Cook Islanders to migrate overseas for enhanced employment, health and education opportunities; a trend that has been occurring for decades due to the Cook Islands' citizenship status to New Zealand.

Despite these challenges, the Cook Islands has made significant progress over the past five years in advancing gender equality. This attests to the effectiveness of governmental measures introduced during the pandemic in preventing a reversal of progress in terms of women's rights and empowerment and highlights the perseverance and resilience of the Cook

Islands people in times of crisis. Achievements were made in leadership and governance, and women's representation in parliament stands at 29.1%, presenting the highest number of women in parliament to date. Further, the number of women in business and business industry leadership roles increased. Progress has been noted in women's health, including in the areas of sexual and reproductive health and female-specific cancers. Successes have also been made in terms of addressing gender-based violence (GBV), and closer collaboration and coordination with stakeholder organisations has been achieved through mechanisms, such as the signing of memorandums of understandings (MOUs). Women's rights have also been furthered through legislative changes and gender-responsive policies, such as the recently launched Social Assistance Policy (SAP) 2024-2028 (Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2024), which considers gender norms and roles in ways that support gender equality.

Further, the Cook Islands has re-established international connections and networks working on advancing women's rights and empowerment. In 2023, for the first time in 14 years, a Cook Islands delegation attended and chaired the 67<sup>th</sup> session of the *Commission on the Status of Women* (CSW), hosted by the United Nations, in New York, USA. The Cook Islands also attended and chaired the 68<sup>th</sup> CSW session in New York, USA in 2024. This ensured that the needs of Cook Islands women and girls were included in the Pacific statement and the CSW outcomes document. By attending the CSW for the past two years, the Cook Islands re-joined a pivotal platform for global discourse on advancing gender equality and women's empowerment. Further, the Cook Islands chaired the *Pacific Islands Forum Women Leaders Meeting* in 2023 and 2024.

Despite these achievements, challenges for achieving gender equality in the Cook Islands remain. These include, for example, closing the gender income gap; increasing women's participation in the labour force; further reducing GBV; and addressing more novel challenges, such as closing the gender digital divide; implementing gender-responsive climate action; and ensuring the safety of girls and women online.

## 1b. Review process

The Social Policy and Services (SPS) Business Unit of the Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs (INTAFF) is the national focal point for the advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment. This report is the result of a desk review conducted by the SPS of Cook Islands' socio-economic and gender development reports from the last five years (2020-2024), including publications by development partners, such as UN Women. Conducting this desk review allowed for synthesizing the progress the Cook Islands has made over this time frame, the persisting challenges for women and girls, as well as future plans to accelerate the implementation of BPfA.

To ensure a transparent and participatory approach, stakeholders were actively involved in the review process and the first draft report was shared with stakeholders for feedback. Further, the review process relied on an 'all-government approach' to ensure that all government agencies contribute and have a stake in achieving gender equality. Therefore, the first draft report was also distributed to all government agencies for feedback and a preliminary BPfA survey was shared to selected agencies. The final report was circulated for validation and received enhancement and endorsement from stakeholders.

As gender equality is a cross-cutting, society-wide issue that requires multi-sectoral engagement, this report highlights the actions and measures taken across the public, private and community sector. However, it only provides an overview of actions that were either directly financed, or endorsed, or supported by the Government of the Cook Islands, in line with its legislation and national policies, during the reporting period. The initiatives by Government were guided by the *National Policy on Gender Equity and Women's Empowerment (NPGWE) 2019-2024* (Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2019), which embodies a vision of a society where all women are protected, empowered, and actively engaged in national development.



## 1c. Structure

This report is structured according to the guiding questions provided by UN Women in the *Guidance notes for comprehensive national level reviews (2023)* and is presented in six sections as follows:

Section	Summary
<b>1. Introduction and overview</b>	This section outlines the core elements of the country-level review process and a summary of the main challenges and achievements over the past five years.
<b>2. Priorities, achievements, challenges and setbacks</b>	An analysis of priorities, achievements, challenges and setbacks is provided, as well as new and emerging priorities.
<b>3. Progress across the 12 BPfA Critical Areas of Concern</b>	A more detailed analysis of measures taken to advance gender equality across the twelve critical areas of concern of the BPfA. is provided. The measures taken, and progress achieved, are outlined through six thematic clusters.
<b>4. National institutions and processes</b>	National processes and mechanisms, pertaining to the implementation and monitoring of the BPfA and Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5) are outlined.
<b>5. Statistics and data</b>	This section highlights the progress on the availability of data disaggregated by sex and gender, as well as remaining challenges and future priorities.
<b>6. Conclusion and next steps</b>	A reflection on future challenges and priority actions that are required to accelerate the implementation of the BPfA is provided.

## Section 2. Priorities, achievements, challenges and setbacks

### 2a. Priorities

#### NPGEWE 2019-2024

The Cook Islands' Government initiatives and priorities for accelerating gender equality and women's empowerment over the past five years have been guided by the *National Policy on Gender Equity and Women's Empowerment (NPGEWE) 2019-2024* (Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2019). This policy presents a revised version of the NPGEWE 2011-2016 and was built on past achievements and lessons learned. The NPGEWE 2019-2024 involved a robust process of peer review and was developed through consultation with stakeholders, including non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community leaders, from Rarotonga and the Outer Cook Islands. This ensured that the priorities and aspirations of the Cook Islands people were captured within this policy.

The NPGEWE 2019-2024 recognises its regional and international commitments and aligns to the *Beijing Platform for Action; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; Convention on the Rights of the Child; Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; the Pacific Platform for Action; the Pacific Plan; Commonwealth Plan of Action; and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. It also aligns with the revitalised *Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration (PLGED)*, which was endorsed in the Cook Islands in November 2023. Through the NPGEWE 2019-2024, Government along with key partners and stakeholders in civil society, reaffirmed its commitment to provide support and targeted interventions that advance, empower, and protect the rights of all women and girls living in the Cook Islands. Since 2019, the principles and commitments of this policy have been reinforced and reflected in multiple sector strategies, island plans, community sustainable development plans, and legislation.

As per NPGEWE 2019-2024, the key priority areas for Government in accelerating progress for women and girls over the past five years have been:

### **Outcome 1: A Gender Responsive Government**

In 2019 it was found that, while significant achievements had been made with the passing of the *Family Protection and Support Act 2017* (which established protection measures for women, girls, and children), gender perspectives had not yet been systematically mainstreamed in all national policies, programmes and strategic plans. This caused concern due to the adverse and unintended negative effects policy interventions and programmes may have on women and girls, potentially resulting in greater gender inequality. Government therefore made it a priority to mainstream gender perspectives into national policies, planning processes, and programmes.

### **Outcome 2: Gender Equity in Leadership and Governance**

When the NPGWE 2019-2024 was launched, there were more women in leadership positions and decision-making position in all sectors than in previous years, and more young women showed an interest in high level careers in government, politics and business. However, men continued to dominate in island governance nationally (80%) and Government continued to fall short of the national target of 30% women in Parliament and 30% women in local governance (Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2019). In 2020, only four of the 55 Island Government Councillors (7.3%) were women (Office of the Public Service Commissioner, 2020), which highlighted the need for targeted efforts to promote women's leadership at the local level. Government set out to sustain progress in gender equity in leadership and governance through greater advocacy and community support.

### **Outcome 3: Women Engaged in Economic Development**

In 2019, the labour force participation rate for women had increased to 65% (Cook Islands Government, 2019), but significant barriers for women entering the workforce remained. Women were engaged in more unpaid work than men; as primary caregivers of children, elderly, and other vulnerable people in the household and community, they were responsible for 75% of all domestic duties and often expected to give up paid work to fulfil these family responsibilities (Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2019). This negatively impacted women in their pursuit of professional careers; high skilled and high paid jobs; promotions; or entrepreneurship. Achieving an enabling environment for the full participation of women

in economic development therefore remained a priority for Government over the past five years. Government aimed to advance gender equality in access to productive resources and earning capacity; reduce barriers to women in business; and advance gender equality in the workplace.

#### **Outcome 4: Healthy Women and Girls**

In 2019, there were few, if any, barriers for women to access health care services in the Cook Islands. Non-communicable disease (NCDs) remained the main cause of illness and premature death for both women and men and comprised over 70% of the overall death rate in 2018 and 2019 (Cook Islands Ministry of Health 2018; Cook Islands Ministry of Health 2020). As more women gained economic independence, finding work outside the home, and occupying more high-level positions, the amount and type of health problems they experienced increased. It was found that more targeted interventions were needed to improve women's and girls' access to relevant and quality healthcare. In addition, a need for interventions and support to change attitudes, and ensure the burden of caregiving in the home is more equitably shared between men and women, was identified. Barriers to equal access to healthcare persisted for women and girls with disability. In 2020, a need was identified for collaboration between SPS and the Ministry of Health to advocate for the health of women with disability (Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2020).

#### **Outcome 5: Eliminating Violence against Women and Girls**

Data from the Cook Islands Police Service showed that GBV continued to be a problem in 2019. Eliminating violence against women and girls therefore remained one of government's priorities over the past five years. It was also acknowledged that the *Family Protection and Support Act 2017* would require increased resourcing to ensure effective enforcement and implementation of relevant programmes and services targeting survivors and perpetrators of GBV. Through this priority area, government aimed to continue to promote gender equality and women's human rights, as well as promote awareness about, and sensitivity to, GBV among researchers; policy makers; law enforcement officers; and health care providers.

As outlined in table 1, the priority areas set out in the NPGWE 2019-2024, and pursued by Government over the past five years, align closely with the BPfA critical areas of concern.

Further, and as illustrated in table 2, the NPGWE 2019-2024 priorities align with the majority of the Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) ‘achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’ targets. Thus, the priorities set by Government over the past five years resonate strongly with both the BPfA and SDG 5.

**Table 1. Alignment between NPGWE 2019-2024 priorities and BPfA Critical Areas**

<b>NPGWE 2019-2024</b>	<b>BPfA Critical Area</b>
<b>Outcome 1:</b> A Gender Responsive Government	<b>Critical Area H:</b> Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women
<b>Outcome 2:</b> Gender Equity in Leadership and Governance	<b>Critical Area G:</b> Women in Power and Decision making <b>Critical Area I:</b> Human Rights of Women
<b>Outcome 3:</b> Women Engaged in Economic Development	<b>Critical Area F:</b> Women and the Economy <b>Critical Area I:</b> Human Rights of Women
<b>Outcome 4:</b> Healthy Women and Girls	<b>Critical Area C:</b> Women and Health <b>Critical Area I:</b> Human Rights of Women
<b>Outcome 5:</b> Eliminating Violence against Women and Girls	<b>Critical Area D:</b> Violence against women <b>Critical Area I:</b> Human Rights of Women

Source: Compiled by INTAFF for the purpose of this report (2024)

**Table 2. Alignment between NPGWE 2019-2024 priorities and SDG 5 targets**

<b>NPGWE 2019-2024</b>	<b>SDG 5 Target</b>
<b>Outcome 1 to 5</b>	<b>5.1</b> End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere
<b>Outcome 5</b>	<b>5.2</b> Eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls

<b>Outcome 1; Outcome 3</b>	<b>5.4</b> Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work
<b>Outcome 2; Outcome 3</b>	<b>5.5</b> Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life
<b>Outcome 4</b>	<b>5.6</b> Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights
<b>Outcome 3</b>	<b>5a.</b> Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources
<b>Outcome 1</b>	<b>5c.</b> Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls at all levels

Source: Compiled by INTAFF for the purpose of this report (2024)

## 2b. Major achievements, challenges and setbacks

Due to their close alignment, the NPGWE 2019-2024 priorities, BPfA critical areas, and 2030 Agenda (SDG 5) have been implemented in a mutually reinforcing manner. A key challenge over the past five years was presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, which affected the implementation of BPfA.

### COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 response plans and programmes took national priority during the pandemic, and many other programmes, including implementation of the NPGWE 2019-2024, were impacted by this. The Cook Islands' Government introduced temporary measures to offer additional support for its people, particularly its most vulnerable, during the pandemic. Vulnerable people were identified through a survey facilitated by Emergency Management Cook Islands (EMCI). Results were uploaded into EMCI's Geographic Information System

database, allowing identification of vulnerable populations in Rarotonga and in most of the Outer Cook Islands.

It has been widely acknowledged that globally the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected the vulnerable, including, for example, women and girls with disabilities; women and girls with underlying health issues; as well as financially deprived women and girls. This also applied in the Cook Islands where the pandemic presented an unforeseen and challenging obstacle in terms of progressing and implementing the NPGWE 2019-2024 priorities, and in turn, the 12 critical areas of concern of BPfA and SDG 5.

The mental health of the Cook Island population was significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a 300% increase in mental health referrals, and more than 2000 Cook Islanders attending stress and anxiety workshop during the pandemic (Cook Islands Ministry of Health, 2024a). Women's physical health was also impacted as health programmes, such as the national breast cancer screening programme, experienced a backlog, due to women unable to be screened. These developments had implications for the BPfA critical area of *Concern C: Women and Health*. Further, periods of school closures, to curb the risk of contamination and exposure to COVID-19, presented a potential obstacle to the implementation of BPfA critical area of *Concern B: Education and Training of Women*. Furthermore, data from the Cook Islands Police Service showed an overall increase in domestic violence incidents in the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021, impacting critical area of *Concern D: Violence against women*. Lastly, as the downturn in economic activity negatively impacted on local livelihoods and the socio-economic status of families, the COVID-19 pandemic also presented a potential obstacle to progress in critical area of *Concern A: Women and Poverty*. According to the most recent Labour Force Survey (Cook Islands Government, 2019), 25% of women are engaged in informal employment, such as home-based production work and crafts. Women in such employment were particularly vulnerable to the financial impacts of COVID-19, due to factors such as a lack of income with the collapse of the tourism industry.

In early 2020, temporary social protection initiatives were introduced by the Cook Islands' Government as part of its economic response plan to mitigate the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Details of these benefits are outlined in table 3.

**Table 3. The Cook Islands Economic Response Plan: Social Protection Initiatives**

<b>Initiative</b>	<b>Target Group</b>	<b>Description of Support</b>
<b>Support for Welfare Recipients</b>	Vulnerable people/social assistance recipients	April 2020. One-off payment of NZ\$400 to recipients of the Old Age Pension, Caregivers Allowance, Destitute Benefit, and Infirm Benefit.
<b>School Closure Support</b>	Children	April 2020. One-off payment of NZ\$100 for each fortnight that school holidays were extended.
<b>Wage Subsidy</b>	Formal workers	March 2020 to 30 April 2021 and August 2021 to April 2022. Minimum wage support increased to 40 hours per week at NZ\$8.00 per hour, equivalent to NZ\$320 per week for a full-time employee working more than 20 hours per week, and NZ\$160 per week for part-time employees working between 5 and 19 hours per week.
<b>Unemployment Benefit</b>	Newly unemployed workers	April 2020 to June 2021. Support for people unemployed due to COVID-19. Initially NZ\$266 per week for four weeks, along with assistance from the Ministry of Internal Affairs (INTAFF) to find work. There were three one-month extensions, with the rate reduced to NZ\$150 per week.
<b>Employment Services</b>	Unemployed	April 2020–ongoing. INTAFF provided people seeking employment with a list of jobs submitted by employers.
<b>Training Subsidy</b>	Formal workers and businesses	July 2020 to June 2021. Equivalent financial support as the wage subsidy for businesses to fund employees on approved training initiatives at the Cook Islands Tertiary Training Institute, Ministry of Education, or the University of the South Pacific Cook Islands Campus.
<b>Fees Free Initiative</b>	People wanting to study	July 2020 to July 2021 and January 2022 to June 2022. Government funding for the cost of upskilling training courses for recipients of the training subsidy and other students not under the training subsidy.



<b>Electricity Discount</b>	Universal	March 2020 to March 2021. Series of discounts on monthly electricity charges for domestic customers in Rarotonga and Aitutaki; 100 per cent discount March to June 2020, NZ\$100 discount for July to December 2020, and 60 per cent discount from January to March 2021.
<b>Emergency Hardship Fund</b>	People facing hardship	June 2020 to June 2021. A temporary fund for people facing hardship who do not qualify for any of the other assistance. One-off payment of NZ\$600 or four fortnightly payments of NZ\$150 over two months for individuals, with NZ\$25 per fortnight for each eligible family member, up to a family of five.
<b>Quarantine Support</b>	Returning Cook Islands residents	March 2020 to March 2021. Minimum wage support for returning Cook Islands residents in quarantine in Rarotonga.
<b>Reduced Superannuation Contributions</b>	Formal workers and businesses	April 2020 to March 2021. Compulsory employer and employee contributions to the Cook Islands National Superannuation Fund were reduced from 5 per cent to 3 per cent during April to June 2020 and subsequently reduced to 1%
<b>Sole Trader Cash Grants</b>	Sole Traders	April 2020 to April 2021. Up to three NZ\$3,000 cash grants for sole traders with registered businesses that had a 30 per cent loss of income where it is the primary source of income.
<b>Isolation Income Support</b>	People under Isolation or Quarantine Orders	February 2022 to April 2022. Minimum wage support for full- time and part-time workers who are required to isolate at home.

Source: Cook Islands Ministry of Finance & Economic Management (2023)

These temporary measures included, for example, offering parents additional child benefit every fortnight during COVID-19-related school closures. As 36% of the female population were engaged in childcare responsibilities, and 60% of the female population in unpaid housework (Cook Islands Government, 2019), this measure would have alleviated some of the financial burden on female parents and guardians. Further measures included offering financial support to businesses to cover staff absences due to self-isolation, and unemployment benefit to any employee who had lost their employment as a result of the

pandemic. One-off welfare support payments, paid on top of existing welfare payments, to the infirm; destitute; pensioners; and caregivers, were also provided. As caregiving is a responsibility that predominantly falls on women in the Cook Islands, this measure would have alleviated some of the financial burden on female caregivers. While the measures that were introduced were not solely targeted at women, they nonetheless directly benefited many women, such as female business owners; female parents and guardians; female caregivers; infirm and destitute women; and female pensioners.

Despite the unprecedented challenges and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been several major achievements in the advancement of gender equality and the empowerment of women in the Cook Islands over the past five years. This indicates that the measures introduced by Government during the pandemic were able to prevent a reversal of progress in terms of women's rights and empowerment and highlights the perseverance and resilience of the women of the Cook Islands in times of crisis.

More specifically, challenges, progress, and achievements have been noted in the following areas:

### **Financial resources**

**Challenges and setbacks:** Government has found that a lack of dedicated financial resources has hindered the effective implementation of various of its gender equality programmes. This gap in funding not only affected the scope and reach of these initiatives but also undermined their potential impact. To address this, Government is committed to exploring innovative funding mechanisms and enhancing budget allocations specifically earmarked for gender-related activities.

INTAFF has continued to provide financial resources to NGOs and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) working in gender equality and women's empowerment, through provision of the Social Impact Fund (SIF). The SIF is a joint initiative with the New Zealand Government and provides funding to NGOs to deliver priority services for women, youth, children, people with disabilities etc. However, some NGOs and CSOs have expressed concerns around the funding amount available and funding predictability. Funding predictability is seen as a key issue, as

although the SIF has been supportive, it is a contestable fund and funding certainty is not guaranteed (Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2020).

**Progress and achievements:** Several NGOs and CSOs, working on achieving gender equality and women's rights and empowerment, have continued to remain recipients of Government's SIF. Further, several stakeholder organisations have managed to secure international grant funding for projects and programmes aiming to advance gender-equality and women's rights.

### Relationships with stakeholder organisations

**Challenges and setbacks:** While national coordination mechanisms are in place, difficulties have been encountered in coordination and communication between stakeholders and implementing agencies.

**Progress and achievements:** To address this challenge, Government continued to formalize memorandums of understanding (MOU) with stakeholder organisations that facilitate social development and gender equality. A key achievement in this regard was the signing of a MOU between Government and the Cook Islands Family and Welfare Association (CIFWA) in 2023. This MOU ensures that CIFWA's services of antenatal care; family planning; and protection of women at risk of gender-based and sexual violence, will present a key component of Government's response plan in national emergencies. Further, in 2023 a MOU was signed between Government, Punanga Tauturu Incorporated (PTI) (Cook Islands Women Counselling Centre), and the Men's Counselling Centre Te Punaanga Ora'anga Matutu (Te POM), strengthening the support available for women and men affected by domestic violence issues.

## Gender mainstreaming

**Challenges and setbacks:** Gender mainstreaming into Government programmes, policies and budget remains a work in progress, as gender equality perspectives are not yet systematically integrated into these.

**Progress and achievements:** Gender analysis awareness raising and training within Government agencies and stakeholder organisations, including the Cook Islands Police Service; Ministry of Justice; Public Service Commission; INTAFF; and Cook Islands National Council of Women, led to a rise in commitments to gender mainstreaming across these agencies and organisations. This was accompanied by a rise in male champions vocal in promoting the gender equality and mainstreaming themes. To date those individuals have taken on leadership roles and continue to practice what they have learnt by advocating for gender equality and women's empowerment.

Over the past five years, Government made gains in updating and enacting legislation and refining commitments alongside international human rights treaties and constitutional and legislative provisions.

## Gender Equity in Leadership and Governance

**Challenges and setbacks:** Although women are represented in leadership roles in Government as heads of ministries, women continue to have much lower rates of representation at the Island government and parliament levels than men.

Discussions around implementing gender quotas or other affirmative action measures to ensure a more balanced representation of women in parliament have been ongoing. While these measures have not yet been fully adopted, they remain a key area of advocacy for women's rights organisations.

**Progress and achievements:** The Cook Islands hosted the *52nd Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Leaders Meeting* in Rarotonga in 2023. At the PIF, leaders endorsed the revitalised *Pacific*

*Leaders Gender Equality Declaration* (PLGED). This commitment to gender equality and social inclusion is to be actioned as part of achieving the *Leaders 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent Vision*. One of the key commitments made included accelerating measures to strengthen the participation of women and girls at all levels of leadership and decision making. Achieving gender equity in leadership and governance is crucial for representation, enhanced consideration of women's priorities, and improved decision-making.

Considerable achievements have been made in terms of leadership and governance. The percentage of female board directors in the Cook Islands increased from 32% in 2021 to 40% in 2023 (global average – 23% in 2023) (PSDI, 2021; PSDI 2024). This figure lies well above the regional average of 26% and the Cook Islands are one of the highest performing countries in the region in terms of women's representation on boards. Women comprised 29% of Chief Executive Officers in 2023, representing a marginal increase from 27% in 2021, and remaining well above the regional average of 20% (PSDI, 2024). The percentage of boards with gender parity in the Cook Islands increased from 17% in 2021 to 38% in 2024 (PSDI, 2024). These gains do not only reflect the outstanding achievements of individual women but also suggest a shift in societal norms and attitudes towards women in leadership positions, which government and stakeholders has been working towards.

Women's representation in parliament has increased over the past five years. During the 2022 general election, the number of female candidates more than doubled compared to 2014 and increased by seven candidates from 2018. Further, while seven women ran for Parliament in 2014, 12 contested in 2018, and 19 ran in 2022. As of 2024, women's representation in parliament lies at 29.1%, which is the highest number of women in parliament to date. The national target of 30% of women in parliament is thus close to being reached. The Cook Islands currently have the highest rate of female members of parliament in the Pacific<sup>1</sup>; its rate is higher than the Pacific average female parliament representation rate of 8.4% (2021) (PACWIP, 2024).

Further, in 2024, women's representation among Island Government Councillors increased to ten (18%); a promising indicator that women are progressively taking on more leadership roles. On the Outer Cook Island of Aitutaki, the 2024 election produced a monumental five of

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<sup>1</sup> excluding New Zealand, Australia and Pacific islands considered to be part of France and the United States of America

eight (62.5%) women Councillors, which presents the highest percentage of women in leadership at Island Council level ever recorded in the Cook Islands.

### **Empowering Women in Economic Participation**

**Challenges and Setbacks:** The impact of the opportunity cost of the time allocated to childbearing has encouraged women to leave the labour force after giving birth. In 2019, the labour force participation rate was higher for men (77.8%) than women (63.4%) (Cook Islands Government, 2019). Further, the rate was lower for women in the Northern Outer Islands group (52%) and Southern Outer Islands group (54%), compared to Rarotonga (67%). The greatest gender disparity in labour force participation rates was found in the Southern Outer Islands group with a rate of 54% for women and 69% for men (Cook Islands Government, 2019). As the 2023 Labour Force Survey is yet to be published, it is not possible to evaluate progress made in terms of women's labour force participation since 2019.

According to the most recent Census (2021), the average annual income of those aged 15 years and above is \$19,249, with \$20,209 for males and \$18,348 for females (Cook Islands Statistics Office, 2022a). As of 2021, the income gap between male and female pay remains; in 2016 and 2021 the medium income range stood at \$10,000-\$14,000 for women and \$15,000-\$19,000 for men (Cook Islands Statistics Office 2022a). While the income gap between male and female pay has narrowed between 2006 and 2021, a significant gap remains to date and Government has flagged this as an area of concern (see NSDA2020+).

The cost of living and provision of a livable wage present primary concerns in the Cook Islands, and the hike in prices has presented a challenge for many Cook Islanders. For example, between the September 2022 and September 2023 quarters, the cost of fish and seafood increased by 60%; poultry and eggs increased by 15%; vegetables by 11%, and meat by 7% (Cook Islands Statistics Office, 2022b; Cook Islands Statistics Office, 2023). Further, the continued high cost of electricity and transport presented a challenge for many households and businesses, and increases in rent prices impacted businesses that provide accommodation for their workers. In 2022, INTAFF's Labour and Consumer Inspectorate launched a consumer poll to collect data on how Cook Islanders are coping with this hike in

cost of living. 319 respondents completed the poll, of which the majority were women. When asked whether household income is sufficient to cover weekly expenses, 57% of respondents answered that it is not, and 75% stated that they are not able to save weekly (Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2022).

Challenges, around the cost of living, are experienced, in particular, in the Outer Cook Islands where the cost of consumer products is higher than in Rarotonga due to shipping costs. Basic food commodities are often twice the normal price of that in Rarotonga. Women in the Outer Cook Islands therefore continue to face a multitude of challenges which hinder their economic activities, including high cost of consumer goods; limited market access and employment opportunities; and high shipping costs (Cook Islands Government, 2022). Freight issues continue to remain one of the biggest economic challenges for women of the Outer Islands, posing challenges to stock replenishment and possibilities of expanding their businesses to Rarotonga.

**Progress and achievements:** Addressing the gender wage gap remained a priority. Efforts to ensure equal pay for work of equal value, promote pay transparency, and conduct comprehensive job evaluations have been ongoing. An accurate assessment of whether progress has been made in terms of the gender income gap between 2021 and 2024 will not be possible until 2026, when the next census data is collected. However, positive trends have been witnessed over the past five years, indicating that progress has been made in empowering women in economic participation. One key achievement pertains to the number of women in business and business industry leadership roles in the Cook Islands, which has increased over the past years (PSDI, 2024). This indicates women's economic perseverance even in times of unprecedented challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

A childcare subsidy programme has been introduced to provide affordable childcare for children aged 0–3 years. Affordable early childcare services can increase labour participation rates, particularly among women, by alleviating the burden of childcare. Further, a key achievement has been the expansion of parental leave allowances. In 2024, maternity leave was extended from 6 to 14 weeks of paid leave for mothers, while paternity leave was increased from 2 days of paid and 3 days of unpaid leave to 2 weeks of fully paid leave for fathers.

## Elimination of Violence against Women and Girls

**Challenges and Setbacks:** GBV is interlinked with the perceived role of women within families and society. The most recent national study of GBV (Cook Islands Ministry of Health, 2014) revealed that 26% of women believed that they should obey their husband even if they disagree with him. Shifting societal attitudes towards gender roles remains an ongoing challenge.

Police data showed an overall increase in domestic violence incidents in 2020 and 2021. This increase aligns with data from around the world revealing that violence against women increased during the pandemic.

The most recent national survey on GBV was conducted in 2014 (Cook Islands Ministry of Health, 2014) and revealed that 33% of ever-partnered women reported experiencing physical or sexual abuse from an intimate partner in their lifetime. However, these statistics are now outdated, and there thus exists a lack of up-to-data national statistics to grasp the realities of women and girls experiencing GBV and design appropriate and effective interventions.

**Progress and Achievements:** Progress has been made in terms of eliminating violence against women. INTAFF; the Ministry of Health; Cook Islands Police Service; and other stakeholder agencies have continued to join efforts on GBV reduction and awareness efforts and campaigns. Legislative changes were made through the *Crimes (Sexual Offences) Amendment Act 2023*, which will provide greater protection for female survivors of sexual violence. In 2022, a male Counselling Centre, Te POMS, which focuses on addressing domestic problems affecting men and families was established, which presented an important further step towards the elimination of violence against women and girls.

In 2024, Punanga Tauturu Incorporated secured \$406,000 (NZD) of grant funding from Pacific Community (SPC) to implement 12 project activities to reduce GBV in Rarotonga and the Outer Cook Islands, based on Pacific best practices and collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders. As part of this project, PTI will conduct a large-scale national survey to address the lack of up-to-data national statistics on GBV.



According to police data, the number of domestic violence cases decreased in 2022 and was lower than the previous two years. This indicates that efforts by Government and stakeholders to eliminate violence against women are working.

## Health Outcomes

**Challenges and setbacks:** NCDs remain a significant health challenge for women in the Cook Islands. Over 5,800 cases of NCDs were reported as of 2023 (52% females and 48% males), indicating a 5.4% increase from 5,500 in 2020. NCDs affect more than half (52%) of the resident population aged 15 and above (Cook Islands Ministry of Health, 2024b). The gender gap in the NCDs prevalence rate reflects healthcare seeking behaviours, access to preventative measures and lifestyle choices. Reducing NCDs amongst women (and men) by promoting healthy diets and exercise presents an ongoing challenge (Cook Islands Ministry of Health, 2024b). Further, ensuring equal access to healthcare for women with disabilities remained a challenge.

The Cook Islands remain one of several Pacific Island countries with a high rate of adolescent pregnancies. Over the past four years, the adolescent pregnancy to birth rate stood at 10% (2020), 9.2% (2021), 3.5% (2022) and 9.8% (2023) (Cook Islands Ministry of Health, 2020; Cook Islands Ministry of Health, 2024b). Even though the adolescent pregnancy rates over the past five years have remained lower than those recorded prior to 2019, the goal of achieving a 30% reduction in teenage pregnancy, as set out in the NPGWE 2019-2024, remains an ongoing challenge. Starting childbearing early often limits education and work opportunities for young mothers and can lead to poor health outcomes (Cook Islands Government, 2015).

Breast cancer remains a significant concern, affecting 131 women as of 2023. Common risk factors include family history; obesity; increasing age; and tobacco use. Between 2021 and 2023, there were 28 new cases, most of which were referred to New Zealand for treatment (Cook Islands Ministry of Health, 2024b). The last mammogram screening occurred in 2022 and was attended by 809 women. The programme was scheduled to run for four weeks but was extended to cover the backlog from the previous two years due to the COVID-19

pandemic. The current mammogram machine is nearing the end of its lifespan and is no longer able to operate at full capacity. Due to this, breast cancer screenings were cancelled in 2023, and breast self-examinations were encouraged. Efforts to improve the availability of medical supplies and equipment are ongoing. A new mammogram machine, which detects breast cancer earlier than the existing machine, is in the procurement stage.

Endometrial cancer is on the rise, predominantly due to obesity. Most patients are referred to New Zealand for treatment, with many vital statuses unknown. Prevention strategies for breast cancer and endometrial cancer have been focusing on controlling NCDs by promoting physical activity and healthy diets (Cook Islands Ministry of Health, 2024b).

The Cook Islands has been facing ongoing challenges in terms of uptake of cervical cancer screening. The *2022 NCD STEPS survey* revealed that only 61.2% of women aged 18-69 had ever had a screening test for cervical cancer (Cook Islands Ministry of Health, 2024c).

**Progress and Achievements:** The Cook Islands has a good track record of promoting maternal health and nearly all pregnant women receive antenatal care by medical professionals. Since 1995, the Cook Islands has not recorded any maternal deaths.

Government and stakeholders have implemented awareness campaigns, including sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education, to promote and support women's SRH rights. SRH continues to be taught in schools and Government and stakeholders have continued to advance women's SRH rights through initiatives such as broadcasting information related to SRH on local media. A recent study (IPPF & UNFPA, 2021), which assessed young people's access to sexuality education outside of school in Pacific Island states, found that Cook Islands respondents were most likely to report that they had received such education (85%), compared to respondents in Fiji (75%); Samoa (85%); Tuvalu (83%); Solomon Islands (50%); and Kiribati (33%).

Considerable progress was made in terms of the use of contraceptives, as the contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) increased significantly. CPR stood at 17.6% in 2020 and increased to 37.5% in 2023 (Cook Islands Ministry of Health, 2024b). This marks a 53% increase and is the highest recorded in the past five years. Considering the role of contraceptives in preventing

unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, this presents a considerable achievement.

To increase uptake of cervical cancer screening, Government introduced a pilot self-testing programme for cervical cancer in 2023, with a promising uptake rate, especially by women who were overdue for pap-smear testing.

## **Education Outcomes**

**Challenges and setbacks:** Diagnosing and supporting dyslexic girls (and boys) in the outer Cook Islands remained an ongoing challenge. This is the case as dyslexia is not an obvious disability and as there exists a lack of qualified assessors, who can identify students with dyslexic characteristics, in the Outer Islands.

Males dominate in trade qualifications (Cook Islands Statistics Office, 2021) and women continue to be underrepresented in terms of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) qualifications and careers.

**Progress and Achievements:** Education in the Cook Islands remains free at all public schools and inclusive and compulsory for all children from five to 16 years of age. The Cook Islands net enrolment rate at primary education level stands at 100% for both males and females, and at 87% for males and 88% for females at secondary education level (Cook Islands Ministry of Education, 2021).

The most recent education statistics report (Cook Islands Ministry of Education, 2021) revealed that female students outperform their male counterparts in most national literacy and numeracy assessments at all levels. For example, in Year 3 numeracy evaluations, girls outperform boys at the national level; 75% of girls are at, or above, the expected numeracy level for their age range, compared to 62% of boys. For English year 4 literacy, 60% of girls are at, or above, the expected level, compared to 40% of boys. In terms of the national year 8 Māori literacy rate, 55% of girls and 38% of boys, are at, or above the expected level for their age.

To make nation-wide progress in diagnosing and supporting dyslexic girls (and boys), the Cook Islands Dyslexia Society Incorporated (CIDSi) started to implement a comprehensive approach to identifying and supporting children with dyslexia in the Outer Southern Group Islands in 2023.

The percentage of women achieving tertiary education is higher than for males for most qualifications (Cook Islands National Statistics Office, 2022a). Women are dominant in the bachelor's degree category (58.9%) and in the postgraduate certificate and diploma category (59.3%). Further, more females than males received tertiary education scholarships in 2021. Initiatives such as annual Science Expos for children and adolescents have aimed to encourage a greater uptake of STEM subjects and degrees by young people, including women.

## 2c. Future Priorities

Over the past five years, major achievements have been made in the priority areas set out by the NPGWE 2019-2024, and, in turn, also in many areas of concern of the BPfA and SDG5. However, challenges and setbacks were also encountered, and further work remains to be done to achieve gender equality. Key challenges that remain include integrating the principles of gender mainstreaming more systematically into Government programmes, policies and budget; closing the gender pay gap; further reducing GBV; further increasing women's representation in leadership and governance; and tackling issues in women's health.

In 2024, a Cook Islands delegation attended the 68<sup>th</sup> *Commission on the Status of Women* (CSW68) in New York, USA under the theme '*Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective*'. The priorities identified by the Cook Islands included strengthening social protection for women and girls; promoting and strengthening initiatives that create economic opportunities for women and girls, particularly in the Outer Cook Islands through targeted programmes and investments; and ensuring that all women and girls have access to essential services, including healthcare; education; and social protection, to enhance their wellbeing. The steps identified to achieve this included reviewing and enhancing existing policies to ensure that these are gender-responsive and

inclusive; investing in capacity-building programmes for women and girls to enhance their skills and empower them to take on leadership roles; fostering collaborative partnerships with regional and international organizations to support the implementation of gender equality initiatives and social protection systems; and establishing robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track progress and ensure the effective implementation of gender equality and social protection programmes.

Further, in 2021, Government launched the *National Sustainable Development Agenda 2020+* (NSDA2020+). The NSDA2020+ comprises three documents: a 100-year vision called *Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui 2021 – 2121*; a Generational Plan - *Te Ara Akapapa'anga Uki - 2021 – 2046* and a 5-year scorecard named *Te Ara Akapapa'anga Iti 2021 – 2026* (Office of the Prime Minister, 2021). *Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui 2021-2121* takes an extended outlook over 100 years and prioritises a generational scale. This period will be interspersed with short to medium-term plans that will be adjusted as required. These plans will align with the philosophy and practice of *Akapapa'anga*; the use and importance of genealogical legacies to and for the Cook Islands and its people. Central to *Te Ara Akapapa'anga Nui – NSDA 2020+* is the aspiration towards achieving *Turanga Memeitaki*, which translates as 'Wellbeing for all'. The NSDA 2020+ defines 'wellbeing' as a vision where each person attains, at its most basic, a state of being comfortable, healthy, and happy.

The 15 goals contained in the NSDA2020+ align with the BPfA, *Sustainable Development Goals* and regional agenda *Small Island Developing States Accelerated Modalities of Action* (SAMOA pathway). Advancing women's rights and achieving gender equality are key priorities in the NSDA2020+. More specifically, the NSDA2020+ sets out the goals of increasing representation of women in politics; reducing income disparity between men and women; removing obstructions to women's career developments; and reducing domestic violence.

In terms of women's economic participation, the *Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030* (Cook Islands Ministry of Finance & Economic Management, 2021) sets out the importance of increasing the female labour participation rate. To ensure that women have the ability to return to the workforce post childbearing, and to ensure that children are supported in a safe environment, the Government will introduce regulation of childcare

services to those operating for children under three<sup>2</sup> ; expand Government support for early childcare education to children between the ages of zero and three; and establish and resource after-school care options at all pre-schools and primary schools. These actions will allow women to return to the workforce (earlier), and, in turn, are expected to increase women's participation in the labour force.

Further, going forward, the recently launched SAP 2024-2028 will support INTAFF in enhancing the delivery of social welfare benefits that protect people from poverty and vulnerability, promote equity, and enhance wellbeing. This policy aims to ensure that gender norms, roles, and relations between women and men are considered in all aspects of social assistance and that existing social assistance initiatives that support gender equality will continue and be expanded. As part of this, Government will create a childcare subsidy programme that provides affordable childcare for children aged 0–3 years and increase the eligibility for the child benefit to include 16– 18-year-olds to ensure adequate support to mothers and families.

A focus on society's most disadvantaged and vulnerable women will remain crucial for advancing gender equality and women's rights going forward. Laws, policies and programmes will continue to encompass the needs and priorities of marginalised groups of women and girls. Enhancing gender equality and women's empowerment for women and girls with disabilities as set out in the *Cook Islands Disability Inclusive Development Policy (DIDP) 2020-2025*, will remain a key focus. Under priority area 9, the DIDP 2020-2025 lists 'women and girls with disability', with a focus on advocating for the reproductive health of women with disability and promoting and advancing equality of opportunity. In 2024, INTAFF, in partnership with the United Nations Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, conducted public consultations engaging with communities to review the *National Disability Action Plan and Positive Aging Policy* to ensure that these policy documents reflect the daily experiences and priorities of women (and men) with disabilities and the country's ageing population.

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<sup>2</sup> Childcare is currently not regulated below the age of 3.

Further, enhanced efforts will be directed at supporting the rights and wellbeing of female foreign workers. Currently, foreign workers and their children are not eligible for social assistance until they become a permanent resident of the Cook Islands. However, foreign workers pay taxes, and some face vulnerabilities, particularly women who have children. To ensure that social assistance is inclusive, Government aims to expand some social welfare benefits to foreign workers. This could make female foreign workers eligible for the newborn allowance and maternity allowance, and their children eligible for the child benefit. Eligibility criteria might be set so that foreign workers who have worked and paid taxes in the country for a certain number of years become eligible for certain social welfare benefits (see SAP 2024-2028).

As women in the Outer Cook Islands continue to experience greater gender equality issues than women in Rarotonga, a key focus will remain on initiatives that aim to advance women's rights and empowerment in the Outer Islands. Efforts will be directed at improving women's access to markets; tackling GBV and women's health issues; supporting and building the capacity of women in politics; and ensuring that policies and programmes address Outer Islands women's needs and priorities.

In terms of addressing women's health issues going forward, several important actions and priorities are set out in the *Cook Islands National Cancer Control Plan (NCCP) 2022-2027*, in terms of female-specific cancers. These include increasing the percentage of breast and cervical cancers diagnosed at an early stage, which will be achieved through actions such as public awareness campaigns on breast self-examinations and establishing a comprehensive cancer screening unit. This policy sets out to create interventions at all levels of the health system, with particular emphasis on components of cancer care including prevention; early detection; diagnosis and treatment services and other needed health system support services. Further, the *Cook Islands National Health Strategic Plan 2023-2027* (Cook Islands Ministry of Health, 2023), sets out targets aimed at enhancing women's health. These include supporting and promoting family planning services to all eligible women and increasing mammogram screening follow up of all eligible women by 1% every 2 years from the 2022 level.

As outlined in the *National Digital Strategy (NDS) 2024-2030* (Office of the Prime Minister, 2024), keeping Cook Islanders safe in digital and online spaces will assume priority going

forward. Efforts will be devoted to ensuring safe online spaces for marginalised and/or vulnerable populations (including women and girls), who face specific digital risks. Government will improve cybersecurity awareness across the country, monitoring and tackling digital harms and risks, building robust digital and cyber protections to safeguard systems and data, and proactively engage with regional and international efforts regarding internet and digital governance. From 2025, the Cook Islands will hold a Digital Festival, showcasing local talent, innovations and digital opportunities. Outreach efforts will focus on engaging women and girls, as well as persons with disabilities. The NDS 2024-2030 sets out to create networks of digital champions, including women and girls, to support their local communities in exploring digital technologies and increasing the relevance of them for local lives and livelihoods. Through efforts such as these, Government aims to close the gender digital divide.

Achieving gender equality continues to be a work in progress that requires a multistakeholder and society-wide approach. Collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders will therefore continue to remain crucial when designing and implementing policies and programmes that aim to advance gender equality and enhance women's empowerment in the Cook Islands going forward.



## **Section 3. Progress across the 12 BPfA Critical areas of concern**

This section provides a more detailed analysis of the measures taken, and progress made, in advancing gender equality across the 12 critical areas of concern of the BPfA since the 2019 report. As per UN Women guidance notes, and for practical purposes, the 12 critical areas of concern have been clustered into the following six dimensions:

**3a. Inclusive development, shared prosperity, and decent work**

**3b. Poverty eradication, social protection, and social services**

**3c. Freedom from violence, stigma, and stereotypes**

**3d. Participation, accountability, and gender-responsive institutions**

**3e. Peaceful and inclusive societies**

**3f. Environmental conservation, protection, and rehabilitation**

### **3a. Inclusive development, shared prosperity and decent work**

#### **Employment and business**

As noted in the Cook Islands EDS 2030, establishing after-school care options for pre-school and primary school children presents a key strategy for increasing the female labour participation rate. In turn, efforts have been directed at providing after-school childcare options for children. In 2024, Apii Nikao, one of the largest primary schools in Rarotonga with approximately 400 students, catering from ECE to year 8, established *Tiaki Tamariki*; Rarotonga's first after school care programme. This service is offered for a small fee and will allow working women (and men) to leave their children in a safe and nurturing environment. Government aims to establish after-school programmes at all pre-schools and primary schools in the Cook Islands. The establishment of *Tiaki Tamariki* presented a crucial first step towards this.

To ease the cost of living, Government increased the minimum wage rate over the reporting period, with the latest increase from \$9 to \$9.50 (NZD) per hour in July 2024. However, as the private sector in the Outer Cook Islands is largely informal, continued minimum wage increases, and in effect, increased cost barriers for businesses, have the potential to increase the practice of informal, self-employed, illegal, or subsistence employment (Cook Islands

Government, 2022). Addressing the drivers of cost of living *and* the cost of business concerns, therefore provided an important strategy for enhancing women's economic empowerment and strengthen the private sector in the Outer Cook Islands. One of these strategies focused on introducing periods of freight subsidy. For example, in 2022 Government implemented a subsidy to reduce the freight rate of food products for those residing in the Northern and Southern Outer Cook Islands. This benefited the economic activities of women in the Outer Cook Islands.

Programmes to support women entrepreneurs have been implemented, providing access to business training and mentorship. Collaboration with stakeholders, including local business women, and organisations such as the Cook Islands Business and Professional Women's Association (CIBPW), has played a vital role in advancing women's economic participation in business over the past five years. The CIBPW mentors and supports women entrepreneurs, helping them navigate the challenges of starting and growing a business. In 2024, Government partnered with stakeholders, to deliver the inaugural annual *Taki Tahi Women in Business summit* in Rarotonga. This event, initiated by a local business woman, was attended by women from Rarotonga and the Outer Islands, and aimed to inspire and encourage women in business, while helping them to overcome daily challenges. In 2023, CIBPW offered a free online business course for local women, sponsored by the Academy of Women Entrepreneurs and the US Embassy. These courses and workshops offered women valuable opportunities to enhance their financial literacy and business skills.

INTAFF continued to collaborate with the Creative Centre; a NGO in Rarotonga providing services aligned to disability, to provide employment opportunities for women (and men) with disability. For example, in 2021, the Creative Centre, in partnership with INTAFF and UNESCO Pacific, offered a 20-week program, which prepared and supported people with disability to enter the workforce. The Creative Centre continued to play an important role in providing financial independence to women (and men) with disability such as by providing these with opportunities for income generation.

In 2024, Government made changes to its immigration policy, allowing foreign workers to take on secondary employment and waiving all fees for 12 months on conditions for additional employment. These changes benefitted female (and male) foreign workers,

allowing for an additional source of income and reduced costs for foreign workers due to the waived fees for additional employment.

### Care work

Government has made increases in the social welfare payments for caregivers. In 2023, the caregivers allowance increased from \$200 to \$300 per month and in 2024 from \$300 to \$400 per month. As the responsibility of caregiving pre-dominantly falls on women, this increased allowance will support and benefit many women in the Cook Islands.

The NGO, Te Vaerua Community Rehabilitation Services, has offered training and services to support caregivers. In 2021, it offered training in basic caregiving skills to better support those caring for people with disability and chronic illnesses. Further, an initiative named ‘meals on wheels’ was launched by Te Vaerua Community Rehabilitation Services in 2024. This initiative involves delivering cooked food to elderly, dealing with chronic illness or isolation. Services offered by NGOs and volunteers have aided in redistributing some of the unpaid care work carried out by women.

In 2022, Government and stakeholders came together as part of a co-design workshop to identify key services to support Cook Islanders over the age of 60, and identify how, and by whom, these services will be delivered. Further, in 2024, INTAFF held public consultations to review the national positive aging policy.

### Information and Communication Technology

The *Cook Islands National Information and Communication Technology (ICTs) policy 2023-2027* (Cook Islands Government, 2023) addresses the gender digital divide by setting out to introduce educational scholarships for women to undertake qualifications in ICT or participate in courses to improve and extend their existing skills. Further, this policy sets out the importance of social media skills and training in the use of electronic devices in preparation for disaster events. Government’s Climate Change Office has been undertaking training to improve the digital skills of those residing in the Outer Cook Islands, with targeted training offered to women. Such women-only training presents an important strategy in closing the gender digital divide.

Further, in 2024, the Cook Islands launched its first *National Digital Strategy 2024-2030*. Government collaborated with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to design this strategy under the project '*Utilizing digitalisation to accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in the Cook Islands*'. The NDS 2024-2030 presents a key milestone in terms of the country's digital transformation. While this Strategy is yet to be implemented, it presents an essential step towards gender equality in ICT. This is the case as the NDS 2024-2030 sets out actions to close the gender digital divide between women and men, and girls and boys, to ensure that everyone can benefit from the potential that digital technology has to offer.

### **Macroeconomic environment**

The COVID-19 pandemic led the Cook Islands to experience one of the largest economic contractions in the world, with two consecutive years of negative economic growth. Government launched the *Economic Recovery Roadmap* (ERR) in 2021 as its main vehicle to drive economic recovery. The overall objective of the ERR was to grow the Cook Islands' GDP to pre-COVID levels (approximately \$550 million), and towards the path the country would have been on pre-COVID by 2025, while keeping within its fiscal responsibility rules. The ERR uses the Cook Islands EDS 2030 as a foundation.

Macroeconomic policies, including fiscal, trade and monetary policies are known to have different impacts on men and women. These policies shape the broader economic environment, and it is therefore crucial to consider the implications these have for women's rights and empowerment. Over the past five years, macroeconomic and fiscal policy has centred on economic recovery post-COVID; however, going forward Government aims to include a greater focus on gender in the macroeconomic environment context.

### 3b. Poverty eradication, social protection and social services

#### Poverty and Social Protection

The rate of households living below the basic needs poverty line fell from 28.4% in 2006 to 8.4% in 2016, in line with the economic growth the country experienced over that time. Further, extreme poverty fell from 2% to 0.2% between those years (Development Pathways, 2020; Gorman et al, 2023). No recent data exists on the number of people, households or women and girls living below the basic needs poverty line as the country's Household Income and Expenditure survey is conducted at irregular intervals due to the high costs involved and the difficulty of securing funding<sup>3</sup>. However, recent research has revealed that the Cook Islands' well-established social welfare benefits system has contributed significantly to reducing poverty and inequality. For example, it has been estimated that the 2016 poverty rate of 8.4% would stand at 19.6% if the Child Benefit, Old Age Pension and Power Subsidy were removed (Gorman et al, 2023).

The Cook Islands has one of the most extensive social protection systems in the Pacific region. It takes a lifecycle approach by supporting people at different stages of life and serves to redistribute income and foster social cohesion. Through social welfare benefits a range of schemes provide a mix of universal and targeted benefits. There is a need for the social assistance system to continue to evolve along with processes of economic and social change. INTAFF's Welfare Business Unit has continued to distribute welfare benefits to all eligible individuals to reduce inequality, ease economic hardships and help individuals reach and maintain adequate standards of living. Welfare benefits cover almost 50% of the Cook Islands population and there are nine welfare consultants stationed in the Cook Islands (including the Outer Cook Islands) to ensure accessibility to support for all eligible individuals. The welfare benefits, which eligible women (and men) can receive in the Cook Islands are summarised in table 3 and include old age pension; infirm benefit; funeral allowance; special assistance fund (to address the very basic and urgent needs of vulnerable elderly and disabled beneficiaries);

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<sup>3</sup> The last Household Income and Expenditure Survey covered 2015-2016 and did not include sex-disaggregated data in terms of poverty statistics

new-born allowance; destitute benefit; care order fund; child benefit; caregivers allowance; power subsidy; caregivers allowance and government-funded maternity leave.

**Table 3: Social Assistance Schemes 2023**

<b>Scheme</b>	<b>Type of Scheme</b>	<b>Value of Scheme in NZD</b>
<b>Child Benefit</b>	Universal	\$50, twice monthly
<b>New-born Allowance</b>	Means-tested	\$1,000, one-off lump sum
<b>Care Order Fund</b>	Means-tested	Case-by-case basis
<b>Caregiver Allowance</b>	Means-tested	\$150, twice monthly
<b>Infirm Benefit</b>	Means-tested	\$200, twice monthly
<b>Maternity Allowance</b>	Means-tested	\$320, per week for 6 weeks
<b>Old Age Pension</b>	Universal	\$260, twice monthly for 60-69 years \$360, twice monthly for 70+ years
<b>Special Assistance Fund</b>	Means-tested	Up to \$10,000, every 5 years
<b>Power Subsidy</b>	Means-tested	\$99, per quarter
<b>Destitute Benefit</b>	Means-tested	\$200, twice monthly
<b>Funeral Allowance</b>	Means-tested	\$600-2,400, one-off lump sum
<b>Christmas Bonus</b>	Variable	\$50, annually

Source: INTAFF website (2024)

In 2024, Government launched the '*Te Kaveinga Akameitaki Ora'anga - Cook Islands National Social Assistance Policy 2024-2028: Protect people from poverty and vulnerability, promote equity and enhance wellbeing*'. This policy establishes a framework for delivering social assistance that is equitable; sustainable; efficient; and effective, aligned with the nation's broader aspirations. A key component of this policy is to provide gender-responsive social protection. In 2024, as set out by this policy, maternity leave was extended from 6 to 14 weeks of paid leave for mothers, while paternity leave was increased from 2 days of paid and 3 days of unpaid leave to 2 weeks of fully paid leave for fathers.

In 2021, 72 beneficiaries received maternity leave allowance. The EDS 2030 notes that the opportunity cost of having children has led many women to exit the workforce after childbirth. To counter this trend and encourage higher female labour participation, the

expansion of paid maternity leave provides mothers with time to establish breastfeeding; care for their babies; and ensure that children receive their vaccinations—enhancing the health and wellbeing of newborns; mothers; fathers; and families. The introduction of expanded paid paternity leave also allows fathers more opportunity to bond with their newborns and provide care for both their child and partner. By increasing paid maternity and paternity leave, this policy strengthens the economic and social wellbeing of women; men; children; and families.

A childcare subsidy program is under development to provide affordable childcare for children aged 0–3 years. The lack of affordable childcare was identified as a significant gap in the Cook Islands' social protection system (UNDP, 2021) and has been prioritized in the *Cook Islands Economic Development Strategy 2030*. Affordable early childcare services can increase labour participation rates, particularly among women, by alleviating the burden of childcare. Without a subsidy, the cost of these services could be prohibitive for caregivers, especially those with vulnerable children at home. By supporting the provision of affordable childcare, the program addresses the disparities caused by the traditional expectation that women bear primary responsibility for childcare, making it a gender-responsive social protection measure. Additionally, it has the potential to deliver broad benefits to children; parents; families; and the economy.

## Health Outcomes

Government and stakeholders have implemented awareness campaigns, including sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education, to promote and support women's SRH rights. For example, in 2020 Government collaborated with CIFWA, which delivered comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) to young inmates (aged 18-25) at the Rarotonga prison. This behaviour change program ran over six weeks and included education on topics such as interpersonal relationships; consent; and sexually transmitted infections.

SRH continues to be taught in schools through the Ministry of Education's *Health and Physical Education Curriculum*, which sets out clear and structured progression of learning objectives. Further, Government and stakeholders have continued to advance women's SRH rights society-wide, through initiatives such as broadcasting SRH information on local media, and

SRH youth clinics run by CIFWA. Access to reproductive health services, including family planning and contraception, have been expanded, and well-established measures such as the condom dispenser system in Rarotonga remain in place.

Public health campaigns have been conducted to raise awareness about women's health issues and promote healthy behaviors. These campaigns have focused on areas such as maternal health; reproductive health; and prevention of GBV. Investments in health infrastructure, including the renovation of healthcare facilities, have been made to ensure that women (and men) have access to quality healthcare services.

The Cook Islands launched the *National Cancer Control Plan 2022-2027*, which provided an important step towards reducing cancer rates in the Cook Islands and strengthening treatment services, including those for female-specific cancers. Government introduced a pilot self-testing programme for cervical cancer in 2023, with a promising uptake rate. A new mammogram machine is in the procurement stage, with the ability to detect breast cancer at an earlier stage than the existing one.

In 2022, a privately owned healthcare service provider; *Rarotonga Home Healthcare Services*, started offering 'out of hospital care services'. Providing such services, including to people with disabilities, in their homes presented an important step for improving disabled women's access to health care. While being a privately-owned service, the nurses of Rarotonga Home Healthcare Services have a close working relationship with the Cook Islands Ministry of Health, as the Ministry provides services that the home care service requires to operate (Etches, 2022).

## Education Outcomes

Training programmes for teachers on inclusive education have been implemented, equipping educators with the skills and knowledge to create supportive and equitable learning environments. In terms of ensuring inclusive education, a formal diagnosis of dyslexia presents an important first step in ensuring that dyslexic girls (and boys) receive the support they need to live up to their full potential in education. In 2023, the Cook Islands Dyslexia Society Incorporated (CIDSi) started to implement a comprehensive approach to identifying



and supporting girls (and boys) with dyslexia in the Outer Southern Group Islands. Assessors travelled to the Outer Islands to test students for dyslexia and provide workshops on the condition. Between August and December 2023, 82 students were assessed in the Outer Islands and 68% were found to display markers of dyslexia (Etches, 2024).

Initiatives such as annual Science Expos for children and adolescents have aimed to encourage a greater uptake of STEM subjects and degrees by young people, including women. Female (and male) high school students aged 14 to 18, with an interest in STEM, can join the Cook Islands Robotic club at the Centre of Excellence for Information Technology (CEIT). The Centre is a collaboration project between the Government of India and the Government of the Cook Islands. In 2019, CEIT, in collaboration with a tertiary and secondary education institute, developed the country's first Robotics Club. The aim of this initiative is to promote and encourage young people, including girls, to consider education and career opportunities in STEM. In six weeks, students designed, built, and programmed a robot to compete in the First Global Robotics Competition in Dubai in 2019. The national competition succeeded in generating interest from over 80 secondary students in Rarotonga. The Cook Islands Robotics Team competed against 189 countries and placed 30th overall in 2019. In 2024, the Robotic club's team consisted, for the first time in its history, of an only female student team. This all-girls team won gold in the alliance category at the 2024 robotics competition *First Global Challenge* in Athens, Greece. These developments present promising steps towards achieving greater representation of women in STEM subjects and degrees.

### **Post-COVID economic recovery and gender equality**

INTAFF delivered comprehensive social welfare support and measures to the Cook Islands people during the pandemic. While these measures were not specifically targeted at women, they nonetheless directly benefited many women. As there have been several significant achievements in the advancement of gender equality and the empowerment of women in the Cook Islands over the past five years, this indicates that the measures introduced by Government during, and following, the pandemic were able to prevent a reversal of progress in terms of women's rights and empowerment. Through the Economic Recovery Roadmap (ERR), Government is working to ensure a strong and sustainable post-pandemic economic recovery, allowing for better economic and social outcomes for all Cook Islanders, including

women and girls. The recently launched SAP policy 2024-2028 includes a focus on delivering gender-responsive social protection. Such measures are anticipated to further advance women's rights and empowerment in a post-COVID-19 economic context.

### 3c. Freedom from violence, stigma and stereotypes

#### Gender-based violence

According to a 2014 study by the Ministry of Health, one in three women (33%), aged 15 to 64, in the Cook Islands has experienced sexual and/or physical violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime (Cook Islands Ministry of Health, 2014). Annually, over 70 cases are reported against men for assaults on women, with the majority of incidents occurring in the home, as noted by INTAFF.

INTAFF, Cook Islands Police Service, Office of the Ombudsman, and various NGOs have continued to actively support and promote campaigns, like *White Ribbon Day* and the *Global 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence* (25 November - 10 December), to foster a 'culture of non-violence' towards women and girls. Further, training programmes for law enforcement and judicial personnel on GBV have been implemented to improve the response to incidents of violence. These programmes have focused on understanding the dynamics of GBV and handling cases sensitively. For example, in 2022, INTAFF, with support from Pacific Community (SPC), ran a two-day GBV workshop in Rarotonga, attended by Government staff; Police officers (including from the Outer Cook Islands); civil society organisations; and judicial officers.

In 2023, the Crown Law Office and Cook Islands Police conducted an informal audit of the domestic violence prosecution files held by the Cook Islands Police Service. Several files were identified as appropriate for more serious charges and were transferred to Crown Law. The audit helped to identify areas for further training and development, particularly around appropriate charging and victim support processes. As a result, the New Zealand Police Partnership for Pacific Policing agreed to provide a New Zealand Police Prosecutor with significant experience in domestic violence prosecutions on a three-month secondment to

the Cook Islands Police Service. This Prosecutor provided training and guidance to Cook Islands Police and assisted with the prosecution of domestic violence cases.

In April 2023, the Cook Islands Parliament passed the *Crimes (Sexual Offences) Amendment Act 2023*. This Act represents a significant milestone in the Cook Islands' progress towards addressing gender-based and sexual violence. The Amendment Act changed the sexual offences provisions of the Crimes Act 1969 by removing, amending, and adding offences, while also updating language and making necessary consequential amendments. The Act contained three major changes to the offence of rape, which will provide greater protection for victims of gender-based and sexual violence. This includes the criminalization of rape within marriage.

The NPGWE 2019-2024 set out the importance of developing and strengthening counselling support services, targeting both survivors and perpetrators of domestic violence, as one of the strategic actions for eliminating violence against women. While the Cook Islands has had a non-governmental Women's Counselling Centre (PTI), since 1994, in 2022 a male equivalent organisation was established. With the establishment of Te POM, the Cook Islands now has a Counselling Centre which focuses on addressing domestic problems affecting men and families. This is a considerable achievement, as perpetrators of domestic violence are able to receive counselling at Te POM, which presents an important step towards the elimination of violence against women and girls. A further achievement was marked by the MOU, which the Cook Islands Police Service signed with PTI and Te POM in 2023, as a preventative framework and to better assist those requiring counselling services for domestic violence.

PTI continued to remain a recipient of Government's SIF. Through this funding, PTI was able to implement several projects, such as delivering GBV workshops in Rarotonga and the Southern Outer Cook Islands. Further, PTI was able to continue to offer counselling and other support services, such as emergency accommodation, to female survivors of GBV. Addressing violence against marginalised women and girls remained a priority. This included a focus on providing GBV training and services to women and girls in the Outer Cook Islands. In 2023, PTI conducted training in the Outer Island of Mauke and established a local GBV community support group named *Te Puna o te Au*. PTI is working on replicating this model in other Outer Islands, which will allow for vital on-the-ground support for female survivors of GBV. Further,

PTI is in the process of collaborating with the National Disability Council, to review its services and ensure that these are accessible to, and inclusive of, women with disabilities.

Growing concern has surrounded the safety of girls, women and youth in digital spaces, due to threats such as online predation and cyber bullying. In 2024, INTAFF conducted a *STOP, BLOCK & TELL* campaign with youth NGOs and primary and high school students to help combat cyberbullying and the challenges and impacts this has on young people. Focus was placed on creating safe and equal online spaces and educating children and youth about their online safety.

### **3d. Participation, accountability and gender-responsive institutions**

#### **Social Policy and Services Business Unit**

INTAFF's Social Policy and Services Business Unit (SPS) is responsible for the Gender output of the organisation. Responsibilities include the development and implementation of national social policy for vulnerable children; women; persons with disability as well as youth and families. More specifically, the SPS is responsible for the implementation of the NPGWE 2019-2024.

SPS is also responsible for the delivery of the Social Impact Fund (SIF); a contestable grant fund designed to contribute to the achievement of the national sustainable development plan goals. The SIF is fully funded by Government to support Registered Civil Society Organisations (CSO), Civil Society groups, Sports and Faith based organisations and Community groups. Calls for proposals to access the SIF are made at least once a year for Project Funding and once every three years for Programme Funding. The SIF provides for the delivery of quality services by organisations and community groups to meet the needs of those most vulnerable and is focused on priority areas of gender; children and youth; persons with disability; elderly; domestic violence and mental health.

#### **Women Development Officers**

To advance gender equality and women's rights in the Outer Islands, it has proven crucial to have on-the-ground women development officers (WDOs) who are integrated into the local

community. WDOs, under the authority of their respective Island Secretary, have played an important role in promoting the implementation of the NPGewe 2019-2024 through Outer Islands' development plans. These female officers have helped agencies coordinate interventions that address gender inequality issues and women's needs and have supported women's empowerment processes. Further, they liaise with the SPS for coordination purposes but also to monitor and relay information about the progress and gaps in implementing the Policy and addressing outer islands women's needs and gender inequalities.

### **Cook Islands National Council of Women**

The Cook Islands National Council of Women (CINCW) serves as a focal point for civil society organisations and facilitates information sharing and collaboration between Government; communities; NGOs; and development partners. CINCW is an umbrella agency and includes 21 members with diverse interests ranging from the Nurses Association; the Young Women Teachers Association; Religious Advisory faith-based women's organisations; the Child Welfare Association, the Family Welfare Council, respective Island Women's Councils' etc. CINCW's network has been an effective mechanism and conduit for advocacy; community awareness raising; and policy implementation and monitoring support.

The CINCW acts as a key channel for information between CSOs and the SPS Business Unit and supports consultation processes on policy and implementation of the NPGewe 2019-2024. As a member of the Steering Committee, it provides feedback about the implementation of this Policy and gender-related concerns expressed by civil society and Cook Islands women. Further, it plays a key role in disseminating information to the Cook Islands population about this Policy and women's human's rights, and monitors and reports on the progress and the remaining gaps for achieving gender equality.

### **Women's participation**

The achievements and developments made in the area of gender equality and leadership reflect concerted efforts to encourage and support women candidates through various initiatives. Over the past five years, Government and stakeholders developed and continued programmes to promote, support and build the capacity of women in politics such as

workshops targeting young women, women leaders and women in the Outer Cook Islands; and education and awareness programmes to address negative gender stereotypes, and reduce discrimination based on gender, age and disability.

Programmes designed to build the capacity of women to participate in politics were implemented, providing training in leadership, public speaking and campaign management. Further, community leadership programmes have been implemented, encouraging women to take on leadership roles within their communities, focusing on building networks of support and providing mentorship opportunities. The Cook Islands Women Parliamentarians Caucus, established in 2018, has been instrumental in pushing for gender-responsive legislation and policies. This Caucus aims to promote gender equality in legislative processes and provide a platform for women parliamentarians to advocate for issues affecting women and girls. Furthermore, efforts to engage traditional leaders in promoting gender equality and supporting women's participation in decision-making processes continued to be crucial in advancing gender equality. These initiatives challenge cultural norms and practices that may hinder women's leadership.

### **3e. Peaceful and inclusive societies**

#### **NSP 2023-2026**

In 2023, the Cook Islands launched its first *National Security Policy (NSP) 2023-2026* (Office of the Prime Minister, 2023). This policy supports the national aspiration for a stable, sustainable and prosperous Cook Islands. Consultations were held with security experts in New Zealand; the public sector; and with community stakeholders from Rarotonga and the Outer Cook Islands. Regional, national and international security agencies identified threats and hazards relevant to the Cook Islands, which informed the NSP.

#### **Gender-based and family violence**

The Cook Islands is deemed to be at low risk of civil unrest; kidnapping, terrorism; piracy; or armed conflict. Thus, efforts around promoting peaceful societies have primarily focused on issues such as GBV and family violence. In fact, one key risk identified in the NSP 2023-2026

relates to the area of ‘personal security’, including domestic violence; domestic criminal activities; and threats to a person’s own personal security such as drug abuse and suicide. Government, NGOs and other stakeholders have continued to work on reducing GBV in Rarotonga and the Outer Cook Islands through various initiatives. The Family Protection and Support Act 2017 continued to present a crucial piece of legislation, ensuring the protection of female survivors of GBV.

### **Rights of the Girl Child**

14% of the Cook Islands population is aged under 15, and 10- to 14-year-olds make up the largest single age group in the country (Cook Islands National Statistics Office, 2022a). The Cook Islands is advanced in terms of its application of the rights of children, including the rights of the girl child. All children in the Cook Islands are provided with a range of services and support with the aim of enabling their wellbeing. These include free education and free health services until the age of 16.

Government has continued to work on ensuring that programmes and services for children and youth are inclusive and gender sensitive. The Cook Islands will launch its 2<sup>nd</sup> Te Pito Manava o te Anau - Cook Islands National Children Policy 2025-2030. When developing the *Cook Islands National Youth Policy 2021-2026*, a survey with 316 youth (aged 15-24) from Rarotonga and several of the Outer Cook Islands was conducted in 2020. The majority of respondents stated that youth programmes and services that are being provided cater to the different needs of males and females and are thus gender sensitive.

## **3f. Environmental conservation, protection and rehabilitation**

### **Gender perspectives in environmental policies and disaster risk reduction**

Climate change impacts differentially on the various sectors of society, including women. Furthermore, women residing in the Outer Cook Islands are more reliant on natural resources for their livelihoods and are more vulnerable to extreme environmental and climate events than women in Rarotonga (UN Women, 2022). In turn, applying environmental and social risk

assessments to achieve positive sustainable development outcomes assumed importance for Government.

The NPGWE 2019-2024 does not refer to the impacts extreme climate or environmental events may have for women and girls, or the role they might play in disaster preparedness and decision-making. Further, the overall representation of women in leadership roles in terms of disaster preparedness and responses remains unknown (UN Women, 2022). However, some reference to this is made within the *National Environment Policy (NEP) 2022-2032* (Cook Islands National Environment Service, 2022). This policy outlines the course of actions required to protect, conserve and manage the Cook Islands environment. It aims to drive stronger collaboration and partnerships based on a holistic approach to national planning that integrates environmental concerns. This Policy was designed in accordance with several guiding principles, including the principle of 'gender'; the need to address any gender gaps or inequalities to achieve ecosystem management and conservation goals.

Further, the *Cook Islands Climate Change Policy 2018-2028* (Office of the Prime Minister, Climate Change Cook Islands, 2018) is based on the principles of equity and inclusiveness in terms of planning and implementation of activities. It sets out that climate change activities will be gender-responsive, participatory and fully transparent and will be based on an integrated, multi-sectoral approach to sustainable development. Even though this Policy does not outline strategies of how this will be achieved, Government has continued to integrate gender perspectives into its disaster risk reduction activities and programmes and continued to engage women in environmental and climate change-related decision making.

Enhancing knowledge on gender perspectives in an environmental context has assumed importance for Government, and staff have attended upskilling and training in this area. For example, in 2023, National Environment Service's staff attended the capacity development programme '*Water and Climate Change: Women's coping strategies in Pacific Small Island States*' delivered under UNESCO's World Water Assessment Program. The program focused on addressing the interlinkages between water and gender in the context of Climate Change, as well as the links with the UN Sustainable Development Goals. As one of the outcomes, participants were equipped with the skills and knowledge to employ the internationally



recognised Toolkit on sex-disaggregated water data collection. A gendered perspective has continued to be included in environmental policies and programmes through community consultations, which ensured that all stakeholders and relevant social groups, including women, are involved from the development stage onwards.

The Cook Islands are in the process of drafting the national *Climate Change Response Bill*, which will address the risk of extreme weather events due to climate change, measures for reducing national vulnerability and climate change resilience. The Climate Change Cook Islands Office has been carrying out community consultations, ensuring that all stakeholders and relevant social groups have their views heard and encompassed within this Bill.

Increased use of ICT is crucial to build resilience to climate change and disaster events and the Climate Change Cook Islands of the Office of the Prime Minister has been working on improving the skills of citizens in accessing online information in relation to key environmental news and issues. Dissemination and timely access of simplified and translated weather and disaster-related information is particularly important in the Outer Cook Islands, due to their vulnerability to the effects of extreme weather events. The Climate Change Office is undertaking training to improve social media skills in the Outer Cook Islands, as well as the use of devices, such as tablets. Targeted training of digital skills has been provided to women of the Outer Cook Islands. Further, in 2024, the Cook Islands launched the *Cook Islands National Pandemic Preparedness Plan: Respiratory Pathogens* (NPPP). This plan recognises that there may be different susceptibilities to a pandemic virus by gender, as well as outlining the importance of ensuring that social protection measures adopted in a pandemic are gender sensitive.

## **Section 4. National Institutions and Processes**

### **National Policy and Action Plan for Gender Equity 2019-2024**

The NPGEWE 2019-2024 presents the current policy and action plan for achieving gender equality and women's empowerment in the Cook Islands (Cook Islands Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2019). The NPGEWE 2019-2024 provides a comprehensive framework for accelerating gender equality and the wellbeing of women and informs the development of gender sensitive legislation and government policies. This policy recognises that gender is not just about women, and that relationships and men and women's access to resources present key elements of gender and development approaches. Consequently, the roles and issues of men and boys are also deemed to be critical in pursuing the country's national and local development goals from a gender equality perspective.

In turn, the NPGEWE 2019-2024's vision is 'a society where all women and men are protected, empowered, and actively engaged in national development' and its mission is to 'establish and strengthen mechanisms that eliminate gender inequalities and empower women of all diversities in all sectors and at all levels'. The accompanying Gender Action Plan contains a matrix of work programme deliverables and activities, lead and implementing agencies, indicative costings, organised by Outcomes, and Strategic Actions. A separate monitoring tool is maintained by INTAFF and contains information on the key outcome and output indicators which allows for tracking progress against the 2011 baseline data.

Currently there exists no tracking mechanism to identify the true allocation of the Cook Islands national budget towards gender equality and women's empowerment. It is also difficult to identify the true allocation of the benefits gained by gender from the National Budget expenditure. Between 2020 and 2024, Pacific Community (SPC) was the only donor partner for SPS through the *Cook Islands Regional Initiatives Grants Program 2021-2022: Women's economic empowerment and the goal of eliminating gender-based violence*.

### **Stakeholder engagement**

When implementing the strategic actions outlined in the NPGEWE 2019-2024, and, in turn, the BPfA and *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (SDG 5), government has

continuously ensured that stakeholders are involved in this process. Stakeholders have included CSOs; NGOs; faith-based organisations; the private sector; as well as marginalised women and girls. In fact, over the past five years, stakeholders such as the CINCW; PTI; and CIFWA, have continued to play a key role in implementation and monitoring of gender equality actions and initiatives.

A key mechanism through which Government has ensured stakeholder participation in implementation and monitoring of NPGWE 2019-2024; BPfA and SDG5 consisted of consultations. Consultations have included workshops; public meetings, interviews and focus groups during which stakeholders and Government exchanged views and information on issues pertaining to gender equality and women's empowerment. These enabled government to gain a clear understanding of stakeholders wants and needs, including those of women and girls in the Outer Cook Islands, as well as women and girls with disabilities. A further mechanism to ensure close collaboration between Government and stakeholders relied on the signing of MOUs, which formalised convergence of will and action in terms of achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. This allowed Government and stakeholders to set out a clear mutual understanding of responsibilities each party holds and how Government and stakeholders will collaborate when working towards achieving gender equality.

The *Cook Islands BPfA Country Report 2024* was prepared in consultation with key stakeholders and was prepared in two stages. The first involved a desk review of literature and reports, and consultation with all Government agencies to prepare a working draft. The second stage involved meetings with key Government agencies and focus groups on the critical areas of BPfA, to discuss and refine the NPGWE progress and report observations and conclusions reached. One of these focus groups was conducted with women leaders of the Outer Cook Islands through the CINCW monthly meeting process.

## **Implementation of CEDAW**

Since accession to the *Convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against Women* (CEDAW) in 2006, the Cook Islands has made several legislative reforms in order to

protect women's rights; achieve justice and protection from GBV; to protect women against harassment and abuse; provide women with autonomy in healthcare; to prohibit discrimination in the workplace due to pregnancy and ensure that continued education is provided to young mothers. The recommendations made by the CEDAW committee in 2018 included establishing an independent human rights institution; extending current legal protections for domestic violence victims to all victims of GBV; addressing discriminatory stereotypes; and raising the legal age of marriage to 18 (UN Women, 2022).

While some of the recommendations made by the CEDAW committee, such as establishing an independent human rights institution and raising the age of marriage to 18, are yet to be implemented, progress has been made in terms of implementing CEDAW articles. For example, the recently extended maternity allowance, from 6 to 12 weeks, presents a form of social assistance that supports the CEDAW provision of non-discrimination towards women in employment. Further, and as outlined in this report, important progress has been made in areas, such as leadership and governance and health.

Due to the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic, the 2021 deadline for the reporting of the State party (Cook Islands) to the UN/CEDAW committee has not been met, and many programmes for implementation were placed on hold as government responded to the impacts of the pandemic. The presentation of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> periodic reports is tentatively scheduled for late November or early December 2024. In preparation, planning is underway to ensure timely submission for the Pacific CEDAW session, which is scheduled for the first week of April 2025. This session will be convened in alignment with the work of the CEDAW Committee, which will also be active in Fiji during this period.

## **Section 5. Statistics and data**

### **Progress on Gender Statistics**

The Cook Islands National Statistics Office (NSO) under the Ministry of Finance and Economic Management is responsible for national statistics. Gender-disaggregated data are available in a wide range of official statistics. Statistics about women that are regularly collated by the NSO include data about age; ethnic affiliation; language; religion; families and households; fertility; work and income; education; housing and place of residence. Information is also available about women's health, such as prevalence rate of NCDs; disability; life expectancy; and the ratio of women to men.

Progress has been made in terms of gender statistics as, since 2019, several Government agencies have included a gender disaggregated data set in their collection and analysis of case data, including the Cook Islands Police Service; INTAFF; Ministry of Education; Ministry of Health; and Ministry of Agriculture. Further, Government staff have attended training on sex-disaggregated data collection, such as training on the recognised Toolkit on sex-disaggregated water data collection.

### **Future Priorities for Gender Statistics**

In 2020, an assessment by UN Women found that only 15% of indicators, required to monitor the SDGs from a gender perspective, were available in the Cook Islands (UN Women, 2020). Key gaps were identified in areas such as care and domestic work and labour market indicators. Further, areas such as gender and poverty; physical and sexual harassment; women's access to assets; and gender and the environment were found to lack comparable methodologies for regular monitoring. Furthermore, there currently exists no sex-disaggregated data on the Cook Islands judiciary (UN Women, 2022). A key priority going forward will be to close these gaps in gender statistics, which will be essential for monitoring the country's gender-related commitments.

## **Section 6. Conclusion and next steps**

The review process was instrumental in providing critical insights into the current state of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in the Cook Islands. It revealed the areas in which the Cook Islands have made significant progress since the last reporting, as well as the setbacks and ongoing challenges, which remain to be addressed.

Government is committed to exploring innovative funding mechanisms and enhancing budget allocations specifically earmarked for gender-related activities. Further, enhancing the capacities of local institutions and organisations to implement gender equality programmes will continue to be vital. Training and resources will be provided to ensure that stakeholder organisations can plan, implement, and monitor these programmes effectively. Government will provide further upskilling opportunities to stakeholder organisations on topics around gender equality and women's empowerment through mechanisms such as workshops and conferences.

This review revealed that further efforts must be made to systematically mainstream gender into Government agencies so that a gender perspective informs all national policies, programmes and strategic plans. It also revealed that efforts need to continue to be assigned to enhancing women's economic and leadership opportunities, with particular attention to the unique economic challenges faced by women in the Outer Islands.

To reduce GBV, further efforts need to be dedicated to achieving a shift in societal attitudes towards gender roles, and to continue to take a society-wide approach to tackle the issue. Further vital work also remains to be done in enhancing women's health, including providing more targeted and timely interventions, care and treatment. A review of the state of available gender statistics in the Cook Islands revealed the need for further sex-aggregated data collection and analysis to better understand and address gender disparities. Further, advancing the rights of women and girls in the Outer Cook Islands; women and girls with disabilities; and female foreign workers will continue to require particular attention, to meet the 2030 Agenda core principle of leaving no one behind.

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